



2023 Walks of Life Honoree

Joan M. Realí

The youngest of six children of Michael and Mary Ellen Hartnett, Joan Realí grew up in the village of Lehid, outside the town of Kenmare in County Kerry, Ireland. An accidental encounter led her to settle in Cleveland when she immigrated at the age of 17. An executive from Ford Motor Company had picked up her oldest brother while he was hitchhiking in the US and promised the young man a job in Cleveland. In addition to Joan, two other brothers, a sister, and the Hartnett parents all followed their brother and son to Cleveland.

Not long after the family reunited here, in the early 1960s, Joan's mother saw a sign in the window of Pioneer Savings Bank on Detroit Road and suggested that Joan apply. Joan stayed at the bank for fifty years, starting as a teller and rising to the rank of Vice President. "I saw that neighborhood as it was, a thriving neighborhood," she remarked. Then I saw that neighborhood go down. And I was a part of that neighborhood as it came back up. I was in mortgage banking by the time I retired. And I was very involved with a lot of the businesses that had come into the neighborhood and helped them with the financing, such as Stone Mad."

In Cleveland, Joan also reconnected with a fellow student from her secondary school in Kenmare, Nell McCarthy Buckley. The Kenmare teachers were steeped in the Gaelic Revival, and both young women had taken dancing lessons, studied Irish, and played Gaelic sports growing up. Nell enlisted Joan's help in teaching Irish social dances under the auspices of a group that was forming called the Gaelic Society.

Joan married Raymond Realí in 1966. Even while raising three daughters, she still found time to serve as the Gaelic Society's longtime treasurer. She also represented the Society at the meetings of the United Irish Societies, which manages Cleveland's annual St. Patrick's Day Parade. She was part of the impetus to join forces with other clubs to hold an annual St. Patrick's Day dance downtown. The funds were used to support activities that promoted Irish traditional culture.

Realí also put her banking skills to use as the treasurer of fundraising efforts for the Irish Palatine Fathers, the Little Brothers and Sisters of the Eucharist, the Westside Catholic Shelter, St. Augustine Church and Hunger Center, and other charitable initiatives. In retirement, she managed her daughter Colleen's successful campaign for Common Pleas Court judge. She joined the board of the Irish American Charitable Foundation and currently represents the IACF at the United Irish Societies. She also serves on the Women's Board of the Beck Center for the Arts. A member of the Ladies Ancient Order of Hibernians, she was chosen by the United Irish Societies as Irish Mother of the Year in 2018.

A longtime resident of Cleveland's West Park neighborhood, Joan now lives in Westlake. Her husband of 56 years passed away in 2022. Two of her daughters, Maureen and Dara, live in Ireland, along with their families. Her daughter Colleen lives in Westlake and is married to David Shapiro. They have a daughter named Caroline, and Joan currently devotes much of her time to her beloved granddaughter.

2023 Walks of Life Award of the Irish American Archives Society, Cleveland OH